

SOME BURIAL CUSTOMS OF THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES.

By R. H. MATHEWS, L.S.

(Read May 21, 1909.)

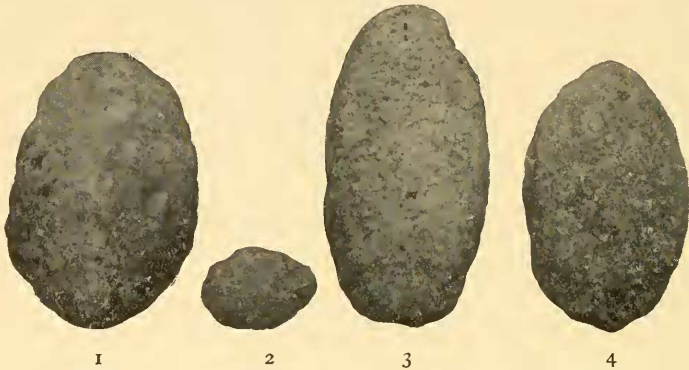
Oval-shaped objects used in connection with native burials in the valley of the Darling River, New South Wales, were manufactured from burnt gypsum,¹ reduced to a powder, and fine sand or ashes, well compounded with water, just as we would mould anything of the kind out of cement or plaster of paris. The necessary shape could be given to the mass while plastic and then allowing it to dry in the sun. These objects are in the shape of a large egg, varying in length from about three to nine inches, by a width of say two and a quarter inches for the smaller ones, up to double that width for the larger. (See Figs. 1, 2, 3 and 4, page 314.)

They are often approximately circular in a section through the middle part, but in other cases such a section would be ovate. Some of them are flattish on one or both sides and are not unlike a cake baked in an elongated form. In a few of the flattened productions, one side is slightly concave, but whether this was intended by the maker it is difficult to say. Probably the wet mass assumed this shape when drying in the sun, because the heat would naturally cause the outer margin, which would dry first, to turn upward, similarly to the way a board warps toward the sun, when exposed in a free state. Nearly all the specimens I have seen were evidently manufactured in the way above described, but an occasional one consists of a piece of sandstone or shale, of a light color, found in the bush, which required but little fashioning to bring it to the required shape.

An old aboriginal, of the Ngunnhalgu tribe, known as Harry Perry by the white people, told me that these *kopai* objects, which he

¹ Called *kopai* by the natives; often erroneously written *copi* and *kopi* by the European residents of that region.

called *mūrdu*, were made out of powdered kopai and a little sand or ashes, much in the way we mix up flour when making dough for baking into bread. He said that when a native of either sex died and was buried, the relatives came to the grave and placed these



This picture shows three medium sized cakes and one small one, all of which are made from gypsum (*kopai*), as above described. I shall call them *murndu*, their native name in the Ngunnhalgu tribe, which occupied the country from about Wilcannia up to near Louth, being the tract from various parts of which my specimens were obtained.

FIG. 1. The *murndu* numbered 1 in the picture, is $6\frac{3}{4}$ inches long, by a maximum width of $4\frac{3}{4}$ inches. The thickest part, at right angles to the width, is $3\frac{7}{8}$ inches. The weight of the article is 2 lbs. 9 oz.

FIG. 2 measures $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches in length, by a mean thickness of $2\frac{1}{8}$ inches. Weight, $4\frac{1}{2}$ oz.

FIG. 3 has a length of a little over $7\frac{7}{8}$ inches and its greatest breadth is $4\frac{1}{8}$ inches. It is oval in section, with a thickness of $3\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Weight, 2 lbs. 14 oz.

FIG. 4 is $6\frac{1}{16}$ inches in length, with a maximum breadth of $3\frac{1}{8}$ inches. It has a practically circular section through the middle. Weight, 2 lbs. 8 oz.

Scattered here and there through the composition of the balls are pieces of gypsum as large as gravel, showing that the mineral was not very well pulverized; a fact which does not surprise us, when we remember that the natives had to burn the gypsum in a camp fire. For the same reason the powder became mixed with small quantities of wood ashes.

kopai balls on top of the mound of earth. For example, if the body were that of an adult man, his widow would place a *mūrdu* on the ground above his head. The deceased's brothers would each place one or more along one side of the grave; his mother and sisters might also lay a *mūrdu* or two on the other side; and so on.

An old man of the Murawarri tribe informed me that in his language the *kopai* ball or tablet is called *yūrda*. When a man, woman, or young person beyond the age of childhood, died, leaves were strewn over the earth covering the grave, and on top of the leaves were laid the *yūrda*. There might be only one or two *yūrda* deposited, or there might be more, depending upon whether the deceased had few or many friends. Mr. E. J. Suttor tells me that he has seen a dozen or more of these *kopai* balls lying on a native's grave. They were put on as soon as the corpse was buried.

A Ngēumba blackfellow told me that in his tribe the name of the *kopai* balls is *dhaura*. The gypsum was collected, burnt and pounded fine by the women, and the men shaped the *dhaura*.

A resident informs me that gypsum is very plentiful on Yantara Station, near Lake Cobham, about 120 miles northwesterly from the Darling River, where tons of it could easily be obtained. Another correspondent, at Kallara Station on the Darling, states that gypsum is quite plentiful there. In fact, gypsum and pipeclay are both easily obtainable along the valley of the Darling, as well as in the hinterland, all the way from its junction with the Murray River up to Brewarrina. There is also a kind of slacked or rotted gypsum which occurs in patches, resembling slacked lime.

Old Perry and others above quoted said that the object of decorating the grave in the way described was to induce the *bo-ri* or spirit of the dead person, to remain in its place of sepulture and thus prevent its roaming through the camp at night to do injury to anyone with whom the deceased might in his or her lifetime have had a feud. When the spirit saw that its owner's death had been properly mourned for in accordance with the tribal custom, it felt more friendly towards everybody. The spirit comes up during the night and sits on top of the grave and commences licking or sucking one or more of the *kopai* balls.

Sir Thomas L. Mitchell is the first author to mention these *kopai* balls. He says:

It was on the summit of a sandhill where I fixed my depot on the Darling [Fort Bourke] that we saw the numerous white balls, and so many graves. The balls are shaped as in the accompanying woodcut, and were made of lime. . . . A native explained one day to Mr. Larmer [a member of Sir

Thomas's Staff] in a very simple manner the meaning of the white balls, by taking a small piece of wood, laying it in the ground and covering it with earth. Then laying his head on one side and closing his eyes, he showed that a dead body was laid in that position in the earth, where these balls were placed above.²

In 1901, Mr. G. Officer, of Kallara Station, described some kopai balls or cakes found at a grave on Curronyalpa run on the Darling River, about fifteen miles above Tilpa. There were thirty-nine specimens at the grave, some of which were lying on the surface, others were partially revealed, and the remainder were found by digging a little way into the sandy soil underneath.

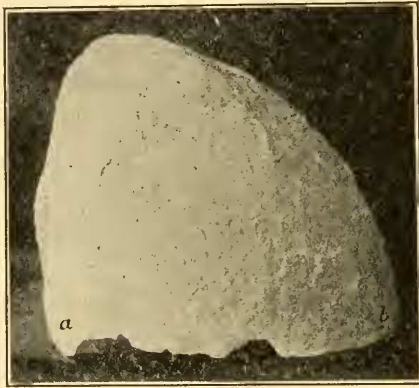


FIG. 5 is an exterior view of a *kurno* or widow's cap, *a* being the front, or part fitting over the forehead, whilst *b* represents the back of the head.

Owing to the unusually large number of pieces on this grave, I am inclined to believe that the greater portion of them had been carried from other graves in the neighborhood to this spot and hidden, for the purpose of protecting them from the vandalism of the white men, who were in the habit of carrying them away as curios. Mr. Higgins, a long resident of the Darling region, writes me that two old blackfellows had stated to him that, when the natives observed that the white people desecrated their burying places in this way, they themselves buried the kopai balls in the ground to keep them

² "Three Expeditions into Eastern Australia" (London, 1838), Vol. I., pp. 253-4. Seven *kopai* balls are illustrated in the woodcut referred to.

out of sight. Possibly nearly all the specimens recovered by Mr. Officer had originally been concealed with earth, but the violent winds of that district had blown the sandy soil away and left them visible. The grave was on a sandhill about three miles back from the river and was therefore out of the way of the white men, whose principal traffic lay along the course of the stream.

Helmet-shaped objects, called *kurno*, known to have been worn on the heads of widows as a sign of mourning, were made from gypsum, burnt and pounded fine, and mixed with water. A fiber

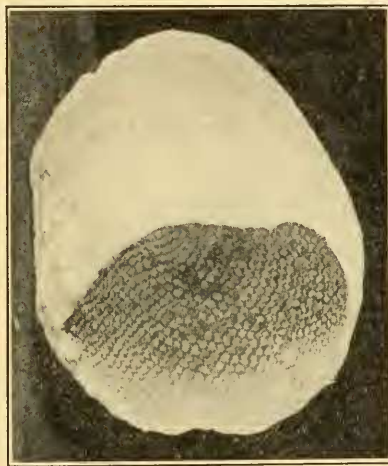


FIG. 6 shows the interior of the cap, with the marks or impression of the net, and the size of its meshes, plainly discernible. This cap weighs 11 lbs. 1 oz., and has been formed of *kopai* or gypsum in the way already described. The specimen was found on a native grave on Lower Budda run, Darling river. I am indebted to Mr. F. W. Beattie for the two photographs, which he took at my request.

or rush net was first placed on the woman's head to protect the hair, and the soft mixture applied outside until it resembled a cap, hence called "widow's caps" by the Europeans. The mixture was not all put on at the same time but by a series of additions extending over a few weeks. The marks of the meshes of the net are distinctly visible in the interior of some of the "caps" of this kind which have been preserved by white men. When the mourning cap had been worn

the customary time, it was taken off and placed by the widow upon the grave of her late husband. When the deceased left a plurality of widows, each wore an emblem of mourning and disposed of it in the same way. If the net was firmly embedded in the dried gypsum, it was left in it, but if the net could be readily detached it was taken out of the cap for future use. In some cases, portions of the woman's hair had to be cut to get the cap off. If the net was left in the cap, it rotted away, but its impression remained. (See Figs. 5 and 6, pages 316 and 317.)

Sir Thomas L. Mitchell reports that on the Darling River he found "Casts in lime or gypsum, which had evidently been taken from a head, the hair of which had been confined by a net, as the impression of it, and some hairs, remained inside." The same author states that, on the Murray, some distance above its confluence with the Darling, he saw some native graves with mounds of earth raised over them, on which were laid the "singular casts of the head in white plaster" which he had before seen at Fort Burke. In some cases the casts of the head were found lying beside the gypsum balls. He gives illustrations of these two "casts," showing also the marks of the net inside.³

In 1838, Mr. Joseph Hawdon observed some skull-shaped caps, made of white plaster, which he thought was obtained by burning shells and grinding them into powder. They were laid on the grave of a native near Lake Bonnie on the Murray River. He says that inside the cap was a network of twine. Mr. Hawdon states that he also noticed a great quantity of crystallized lime or gypsum in the locality; it was in masses some tons weight.⁴

Mr. E. J. Eyre gives an example of the "Korno, or widow's mourning cap, made of carbonate of lime, moulded to the head." The specimen illustrated by him weighed 8½ lbs.⁵

³ *Op. cit.*, Vol. I., pp. 253-254, and Vol. II., p. 113.

⁴ "Diary of an Overland Journey from Port Phillip to Adelaide in 1838" (MSS).

⁵ "Journs. Expeds. Discov. Cent. Australia" (London, 1845), Vol. II., p. 509, Plate I., Fig. 17.